Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
The Giving
Luke 2:1-20
December 21, 2014
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Every year at about December 21, four days before Christmas, the pressure mounts and some of us, many I suspect, begin to experience serious tress – about shopping. Have we done enough? Have we purchased the perfect gift for every person on our list? Will the U.S. Postal Service come through and deliver them all on time? Are they wrapped beautifully enough – an area of real vulnerability for some of us who never quite got the hang of it. Some people I know, the consummately type A people, are so organized and efficient that they completed their entire shopping list weeks – months ago, online, and this morning are sitting back smiling, looking at the rest of us smugly. You know who you are. Others of us – the ones with nerves of steel – haven't even started yet, won't start until tomorrow or the next day: some will even wait until December 24, late in the afternoon. One of our sons, used to do that. I would begin a week or two before, asking him: "Have you bought your mother a present yet?" He waited until the afternoon of Christmas Eve – and always did rather well, I have to admit. In exasperation once I asked him why he insisted on waiting until these last moments. His answer was priceless. "The stores are pretty much empty by that time," he said, "and the clerks are glad to see me. Most of us, however find ourselves between those extremes – and spend a lot of time in the final two weeks worrying about Christmas shopping.

The New York Times carried a feature article several years ago that I clipped and saved in my Christmas file. "The Card-Carrying Angst of the Dysfunctional Shopper." It was about something called "Shopping Disorder," the sad practice of over-spending at Christmas and then wallowing in guilt. The article said there were psychiatrists who specialized in treating the disorder – only in New York, I assume. (Although the Times, in a fascinating feature just last Sunday remarked that Dallas runs a close second to New York in spending on clothes…Who knew?)

It can be bothersome, annoying and stressful and some brave souls simply abandon the practice of Christmas gift giving all together and find it quite liberating. But it can also be joyful, deeply satisfying. And, beneath it all is something very important, something essential to our humanity – namely, learning how to give.

If you are fortunate you learned to give along the way, maybe early in life. One of my favorite Christmas memories is of the time I learned the joy – and the excitement – of giving. I must have been 12 or 13 at the time because I had a paper route and a few dollars in my pocket. My mother took my little brother and me Christmas shopping to find a pocket watch for my

father, the kind that railroaders use, a large pocket watch with a clear, distinct face, fastened to a chain and carried in a watch pocket. Men's vests used to have a small pocket for your pocket watch – and maybe still do. It was that watch that my father pulled out in church when he thought the preacher was going on too long and, to my mother's horror, if he thought the sermon was really bad, wound his watch so that every one in the surrounding pews got the message. I loved it.

My mother took my brother and me to buy a pocket watch for Dad. Our destination was Sellers' Jewelry Store, the finest in town, on the main street, on the second floor, above a bank. I still recall the elegant deep blue of the carpeting on the stairs, and the glittering cases full of jewelry, diamond rings, pins, pearl necklaces, and watches – pocket watches of all sizes and prices. Mr. Sellers, himself, waited on us, a tall, white-haired man in a blue suit. I was impressed that he knew my mother's name and shook my hand.

Mr. Seller showed us the pocket watches and we found the one we wanted. It must have been more expensive than my mother's budget. She told Mr. Seller that we'd have to think about it, although I now think she staged the whole thing to teach us a lesson. Down the blue-carpeted stairway we went and out onto the sidewalk for a high level conference. "That's the watch he would want," she said. "But it is expensive. Let's buy it together." Prior to that time my Christmas gifts for him were pretty much the same each year and utterly without imagination: blue work hankies and a package of Gillette double-edge razor blades. This was a whole new level – a pocket watch from Sellers' Jewelry Store! So I dug in my pocket and contributed a few dollars. My brother, who was six or seven, contributed fifty cents. "All right," she said, "now we have enough," and back up the blue-carpeted stairway we went, marched in and bought the watch. We were thrilled and waited, the three of us, with great excitement to present it to my father on Christmas morning. He played his role perfectly – and oohed and ahhed and said it was just about the most perfect watch in the world and the he couldn't wait to show it off to his railroader friends and tell them that his wife and sons gave it to him. I had discovered the joy of giving. (The watch continues to be a reality for my brother and me. When my father died, mother had the watch mounted in a glass dome and it sat on her bookshelf. When she died – and I don't know how this happened – my brother ended up with Dad's pocket watch, which he still has and every time I see it on his shelf I remind him of the simple injustice of it – how over the top his return is on his pathetic, paltry initial investment. He is, to this day, unmoved.

It is a gift I will never forget giving. Over the years the best, most memorable gifts I have received also reflected something of the giver: plaster of paris hand prints of a kindergartner, a popsicle stick pencil holder

I kept on my desk for years, a Christmas tree ornament with the second grade picture of a little boy, my son, both front teeth missing.

The pocket watch was a practical, useful gift, to be sure, but sometimes the very best gifts are totally impractical, whimsical. A friend told me recently that in her home her mother had a rule: no appliances for Christmas. I still shudder to remember that once I gave, for Christmas, an electric knife, and another time, a blender.

The favorite song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," celebrates the happiness and pure fun of impractical gifts. What, after all, are you supposed to do with Two Turtledoves, Three French Hens, Ladies Dancing, Lords a-Leaping, Pipers Piping, Drummers Drumming, and a Partridge in a Pear Tree – except delight in them. Not a practical, useful gift in there anywhere. But a deeper wisdom – of the impractical extravagance of a true love.

There is deep wisdom – and deep truth here. What God's people wanted, two thousand years ago, was consummately practical. They wanted someone to come and kick the Romans out of their country. They wanted a charismatic political and military leader who would break the yoke of the Roman occupation. After all, they were God's people. And the Roman governor, the officious, privileged Roman functionaries, the Roman soldiers walking the street, bullying, eyeing their women, turning violent and the slightest provocation – were only the most recent of their oppressors going all the way back to the Babylonians, five centuries before. They wanted a Messiah to come and save them someone like David the King, or Judas Maccabeus, who successfully overthrew the Seleucid armies in the 2nd century B.C.E. and restored the Temple – which our Jewish neighbors celebrate at Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights – December 16 through 24, this year – the people wanted desperately and prayed for a leader like that who would rally and organize and attack and push the Romans and their laws and taxes and chariots and swords and gilded helmets – and their arrogance – push all of it into the sea. They longed for the promised Messiah to come and set them free.

And it is the great paradox of our history, that when God came, it was not in the way they wanted and expected and prayed for. It was an infant, a newborn, the essence of weakness and vulnerability: the one human reality that universally calls out of everyone who witnesses it, participates in it, love – a love that was not there before. I see it every time an infant is baptized: the child creates a love that wasn't there before. It, the newborn, was a gift I was blessed to receive five times, with the birth of my children, and each time the new love, simply by showing up, created something altogether new, a love in my heart that hadn't been there before.

Scottish poet, George MacDonald…

They were all looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high:
Thou cam'st, a little baby thing
To make a woman cry.

We still want a God who will powerfully intercede in human history, our history, to put things right, to bring peace to the world, justice to our nation, to heal our diseases and make us whole. We still, some of us do, want a practical God who is good for something, a divine intercession that will be good for our career, get us the raise we need, help us sell our condo or at least find a parking place. And the stunning assertion of Christmas is that God does come to help us, save us, set us free – by calling love out of us. The stunning assertion of Christmas is that God does come to establish justice in our communities and nation, and peace to the world – not by an iron fisted intercession, not by imperial fist – but by love – by giving us the gift we most need, the ability to love, to give, and then to do it – to work for justice and fairness and peace: you and me, because we know now – at Christmas – that we are love and called to live out that love every day of our lives.

The late Langdon Gilkey, who taught theology at the University of Chicago, wrote: "To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us." [Message and Existence, p. 203]

We know now that our fragile grip on life depends on love, every bit as much as it depends on food and drink and shelter. We have learned that infants need human presence human touch, holding, cradling, caressing, singing – if they are to thrive. Christmas reminds us that as desperately as we need love, we need – even more – to love and to give – in order to be human; more than mere survival, but to be the men and women God created us to be.

"I am convinced that the only hell there is," Dostoyevsky said, "is the inability to love."

That is the hell Christ came to save us from. And that is the wholeness, the happiness, the joy, the salvation, God gives us in the birth of the child.

Frederick Buechner's novel, Brendan, is about a sixth century Irish mystic and saint, Brendan the Navigator – who spent his entire life sailing in a little boat looking for paradise – which he believed was out beyond the horizon. Near the end of his life he visits the revered Welsh monk and mystic, Gildas. They talk a long time about the paradise that lies beyond the horizon and Brendan's failure to reach it. As Brendan is about to leave, Gildas stands up…

“For the first time we saw that Gildas wanted one leg. It was gone from the knee down. He was hopping sideways to reach for the stick in the corner when he lost his balance. He would have fallen in a heap if Brendan hadn’t leapt forward and caught him.”

“I’m as crippled as the dark world,” Gildas said.

“If it comes to that, which of us isn’t, my dear,” Brendan said.

“The truth of what Brendan said had stopped all our mouths. We were cripples, all of us. For a moment there was no sound but the bees.”

“To lend each other a hand when we’re falling,” Brendan said, “perhaps that’s the only work that matters in the end.”

“To be enabled to love is the greatest gift given to us,” the distinguished theologian said.

To be taught to give, enabled to love and give, is the highest and holiest of our humanity.

And God set about to do it in the birth of a child.